McQueen, Mrs. D.J.

SHE HAD A PART IN MAKING OF ALBERTA

Pioneer story of Mrs. & Mr. Alfred Hutchings.

It has frequently been said that fact is stranger than fiction. This might easily apply to the lives of many of the early pioneers of Alberta, whose lives are more colorful in romance and adventure than those of characters which live on the printed page.

Many of the old-timers have taken the last long trail home but many are left to tell the tales of their trek into the country when the western world was young, and lured them from the hearthstone of the older civilization. One of these is Mrs. Agnes Hutchings, who is now living in California. Mrs. Hutchings came to Alberta, a bride, in 1880 and lived here until 1923 when she traveled father west to California. During the forty-three years of her life in Alberta, she saw much history made, and had a part in the making. This is commemorated in the archives which the Edmonton Pioneers and Northern Alberta Old-Timers' Association are compiling.

It was on July 7, 1880 that Agnes Cram became the bride of Alfred Hutchings at her father's home, two miles east of Carleton Place, Ontario. Previous to this time, Mr. Hutchings had been in the west, trading with the Indians, and after visiting with his people on a farm near Newboro, on Rideau lake, the young couple turned their faces westward to make their home in the then far away country vaguely known as the North West Territories.

The first part of the journey was comparatively luxurious. Traveling by boat to Kingston, they took the train there for Detroit, crossing the St. Clair river on a ferry. From Detroit they went to Chicago. That city did not cover so much ground as it does today, for the honeymooners traveled from one end of it to the other by hack and

and thoroughly enjoyed the sights. After leaving Chicago, they traveled by train, with neither diner nor sleeper, from Monday evening until Saturday night, when they reached St. Boniface, Manitoba, the end of steel. They crossed the river to Winnipeg where Mr. Hutchings' brother, E. F. Hutchings, was in the harness business in partnership with Mr. Stocker.

In Winnipeg Mr. and Mrs. Hutchings saw a historical sight -- the first train, consisting of an engine and a few flat cars, crossing the Red River. But it did not travel far enough to help them any on the last leg of their journey. They rested in Winnipeg for a fortnight while getting ready for the trip to the North West Territories. It was necessary that they provide themselves with equipment so they secured four carts and one ox for each cart, and a pony and rig for Mrs. Hutchings. Then they started on the long journey across the prairies.

At Pleasant Plains they overtook Frank Oliver and his party, James Ross of the Ross Bros. hardware company, and James Brewster, with whom they traveled the last six hundred miles of the journey.

"This is what distance does for us; the harsh bitter features of this or that experience are slowly obliterated when memory begins to look on the past." Perhaps this accounts for the fact that the old timers review their early experiences with apparent enjoyment, and we never hear one of them speak regretfully of the hardships which came their way. But there were experiences in their westward trip which Mrs. Hutchings says she shall never forget. One of these occurred on their arrival at the Battle river. October had reached there before them, and brought with it the early autumn frosts, but the ice on the river was not of sufficient thickness to carry the party over. They waited a few days and the weather moderated. The ice

broke up and floated down dtream, but the men decided it was dangerous to force the animals to ford the river as the water was very cold.

The travelers had been journeying in company with a band of Indians for a few days previous to reaching the Battle river. The Indians had been on the plains hunting bufallo and were on their way back to Lac La Biche for the winter. There were three Indians, their squaws and children, and the man-power of the party totalled seven. After long consultation they decided to unload all the provisions from the wagons and carts and take all the machinery apart. From the woods they cut logs, and lashing the wheels to the logs, formed a large raft. On this everything, including Frank Oliver's first printing press, provisions, wearing apparel and other equipment, was floated across the river by means of long poles guided by the men.

As there were two heavy lumber wagons, six or eight carts, provisions and clothing, to say nothing of the luggage of the Indians or Mr. and Mrs. Hutchings' personal outfit, it took a week to assemble the out fit and get everything loaded and in shape after crossing the river. The great difficulty, however, was to hold the animals as they had become badly chilled while fording the river, and it was necessary to arrange the wagons, carts, rigs, etc., in shape of a corral. The Indians showed no resentment of the coming of the white man, but was very ready and willing to help them before they left them at this point.

Autumn rains had come by this time and the trails and roads were in bad condition. Consequently, the party did not reach Bittern Lake until October 26. There the Hutchings stopped while the Oliver party continued on to Edmonton. Mr. and Mrs. T.G. Hutchings, who were settled at

Bittern Lake, gave the new-comers a glad welcome, They had been living eight miles away from any white settler during that summer. Previous to Mr. Hutchings' departure for the east, he and his brother had both built shacks at Bittern Lake. They all lived in the larger shack for the first winter. The other was used for a store room as the men conducted a trading post with the Indians and it was necessary to keep the provisions cold. Mr. Roswell visited them there and later when the Hutchings moved to what is known as the Poplar Lake district became their neighbor there.

Only one winter was spent at Bittern Lake. On the first of April, 1881, the Hutchings abandoned their shanties at Bittern Lake and "hit the trail" for civilization meaning Fort Edmonton. It took them about a week to reach the banks of the Saskatchewan. On arriving at Walters' Crossing, opposite the Hudson's Bay fort, they found the ice had commenced to move. This caused another delay of a week or so. The weather turned colder again and the men hauled the carts, wagons and rigs across the river with their own efforts, leaving the animals to be forced over. On this occasion they were amused by the selfishness of the famous old Indian Chief, "Catchmemute", who before putting his horse across the river, forced his squaw to test the depth: when she did not drown he follwed across. At that time the Hudson's Bay company kept the post office in Fort Edmonton and mail arrived once a month.

One would think that the wayfarers had by that time traveled as far as they wanted to go. But not so. They left Edmonton and camped at Dan Noyes' farm over night, then drove on to Cut Bank farm, owned by Mr. William Cust. There they stayed for two or three weeks, and on the twelfth day of May, 1881, they pitched their tents on their own

farm which later Mr. John Fielders and Mrs. Hutchings christened "Poplar Lake". Through the efforts of Mr. Hutchings, a one-roomed shack was built by July, and on August 7 their eldest child, Herbert, was born with neither nurse nor doctor in attendance.

During November of 1881, Dr. Baird and Dr. Robertson, manager of missions for the North-west Territories, arrived in Edmonton and organized the First Presbyterian congregation. The charter members included Mrs. Hutchings, Mrs. Tom Henderson, James Petrie, Mrs. Helminck and Mrs. James Goodrich. Dr. Baird, a fresh college graduate, baptised young Herbert Hutchings, then six months old, at the Belmont school house.

In 1885 the Riel rebellion broke out in Batoche, and when news reached the settlement there was naturally great excitement. Mrs. George Sanderson, the Misses Kelley, Miss Lizzie Long and her nephew Bert, Miss Simpson, Mrs. Hutchings and two children camped in Boze Bros. carpenter shop in conncetion with the Catholic mission at St. Albert, for two weeks. During that time Bishop Grandin kept the party informed as to the rebellion at Batoche and Duck Lake. During the thick of it, James Mowat volunteered to ride to Calgary for news, all wires having been cut. In the excitement of the hour, the Hutchings brothers, J. R. Brenton, Robert Bailey and Herb. Roswell gathered their respective live stock together and herded them north of the Sturgeon river for the protection. But they soon brought them back again.

It was after the rebellion that the first boom struck Edmonton and the Hutchings benefited thereby. Through the sale of one fat ox to the R.N.W.M.P. barracks at Fort Saskatchewan, they realized $180, a large sum in those days.

After the rebellion the years passed in comparative quiet. The land was cleared and broken, the home was gradually improved, and six more children were added to the family. The next event of outstanding importance in Mrs. Hutchings' life was a visit to Winnipeg in the summer of 1897. On this occasion she was accompanied by her two youngest children. This was the first time Mrs. Hutchings had seen a train since leaving St. Boniface in 1880 seventeen years before. In 1902 her husband went east to visit his people and, returning, brought barrels of apples and other choice Ontario fruit, One can readily imagine the relish with which the family would consume these apples, possibly the first the children had seen.

On May 17, 1905, the family circle was broken by death. After a short illness in the Edmonton hospital, Mr. Hutchings passed away. Two years later, in the fall of 1907, Mrs.Hutchings and her five daughters moved into Edmonton. The three sons remained on the farms.

Writing from California where she now resides, Mrs. Hutchings says: "Although I find the climate especially beneficial to my health, I often think of Edmonton and particularly the old farm where so many happy years were spent and where my sons Percy and Frank are now carrying on the good work and making this historical old spot (to our family) more beautiful every year. Where we once carrued candles and lamps, they now have electricity, the milk pail has been replaced by the milking machine in nodern dairy, as also the wagon by the automobile.